

Book Reviews

The Saints of Scotland: Essays in Scottish Church History AD 450-1093. By Alan Macquarrie. Edinburgh: John Donald, 1997. Pp. xi + 258. £14.95. ISBN 0 85976 446 X.

Alan Macquarrie has made an important contribution to the study of Scottish Church history in the early middle ages in a number of articles published over the last decade. It is very welcome to see these articles gathered together here in one volume. They include a general survey of Scottish hagiography first published in 1994, parts of his discussion of early Christian religious houses in Scotland in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, edd. John Blair and Richard Sharpe (1992); papers on St Ninian, early Christian Govan and St Columba published in *RSCHS* in 1987, 1990 and 1994; and articles which appeared (in whole or in part) in *The Innes Review* in 1986, 1993 and 1996 on St Kentigern, St Serf and an account of Laurencekirk's foundation-legend and St Margaret's visit there. Many contributions have been substantially revised, so that this book is more than just a collection of Macquarrie's work, but represents his latest considered view on these topics. The volume also includes previously unpublished discussions on the origins of Christianity in Scotland, on St Patrick, St Mael Rubha of Applecross, St Cadroc of Metz and St Margaret, as well as detailed inquiries into the whereabouts of Himba and into the conflicting evidence concerning the battles of Aedán mac Gabráin (the king of Dál Riata ordained by Columba in 574). The book is capped by a general discussion of hagiography. It is perhaps inevitable that in a book of this nature there is some variation in the level at which it is pitched. There are places (particularly in those sections written for this book) where a conscious effort has been made to reach a general audience; at times, however, the nature of the discussion is unavoidably technical and demanding. There is a risk, therefore, that both the specialist and the general reader will find occasional cause for frustration, depending on their standpoint; for instance, the specialist will learn little new in the discussion of Adomnán, while the general reader may well be irritated by the chunks of untranslated Latin on pp. 122-3.

The most important element in the book is the discussion of saints' Lives. These are the most prominent literary remains relating to the early medieval church. For long, however, the cheerful mix of legend, religious devotion and institutional self-interest which characterises these works has repelled or tantalised the modern scholar in his dour search for historical "facts". As a result, much hagiography has either been dismissed as useless as a historical source, or has been eagerly squeezed for information which it is incapable of providing. There has recently been a growing realisation, however, that hagiography can make an invaluable contribution to reconstructing the mentality of those who wrote it and promoted it; that it can only come into its own as a historical resource once it is understood and analysed first and foremost as literature, rather than as a quarry of disjointed shreds of "evidence" about the life and times of its saintly subjects who in most cases lived many centuries earlier than the texts were first composed. Over the last decade Macquarrie has himself made something of an intellectual journey in this direction, moving away from a fact-finding interest in hagiography to a greater awareness of the wider potential of this material as literature, evidenced especially in his general discussion of hagiography with which the book concludes. It should be said that his approach has always shared some of the concerns of a student of literature, for instance his investigation of the sources and text-history of a saint's Life and the motifs which have been used by its author, his interest in the historical context which lie behind a text's production, and his critical editions and translations of these works (unfortunately a part of Macquarrie's scholarly output which is not properly represented in this volume). He was once, however, much more inclined than he is today to regard saints' Lives as possible repositories of historical information about the saints themselves; for example, on p. 139 and p. 144 n.73 he largely abandons his earlier attempt to reconstruct Kentigern's career from Kentigern's Lives (*Innes Review*, xxxvii (1986), 19-21), and now observes that "a small number of facts about him can, with patience, be teased out of the web of twelfth-century and later hagiography. It is a tribute to the care and skill of Jocelin of Furness in 'stitching together' the Life of St Kentigern that this is now such a difficult process" (pp. 140-1). It is a tribute to Macquarrie's

intellectual integrity that he is ready to make such significant changes to his earlier published work.

Yet, as this quotation reveals, Macquarrie retains a keen interest in trying to “tease out” what he can about the actual lives of these saints: indeed, the sentence just quoted begins by saying “What is important is that Kentigern was a real historical figure” Macquarrie may be less willing to use hagiography as a source for saints as real historical figures, but he does his best with any other written source at his disposal. The paucity of reliable record makes this a desperately difficult task, however, and can often result in no more than a sequence of speculations. Saints may have been flesh and bone once upon a time, but for nearly all those who belong to the “age of saints” between the fifth and seventh centuries there is at best only the merest scraps of viable information about their actual careers. The material which *does* survive are the images of their sanctity constructed centuries later. For the historian, what is important about the saints of Scotland, therefore, is not that they were real historical figures, but that they were saints. It is what they meant as saints to some people at particular periods that we discover most fruitfully. This book goes part of the way towards exploring this aspect; I suspect, however, that a book in the future entitled *The Saints of Scotland* would be devoted much more to the twelfth century, when so many of the surviving saints’ Lives were written, than to the “age of saints” itself.

Dauvit Broun
University of Glasgow

Ayrshire and the Reformation: People and Change, 1490-1600. By Margaret H.B. Sanderson. East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1997. Pp. 193. £14.99. ISBN 1 898410 91 7.

Margaret Sanderson’s study of the reformation in Ayrshire reads as a book that has matured steadily for some time: always clear but balanced in its judgements, an impressive mastery of sources and yet keeping the point to be made always to the forefront. Besides, she acknowledges two teachers of the county as those who “first kindled my enthusiasm for history, social and religious”.

